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SUBJECT: BOSNIA: AMBASSADOR'S INTRODUCTORY CALL ON JEWISH
COMMUNITY LEADER JACOB FINCI

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ENGLISH FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) Ambassador held an introductory meeting with Jewish Community leader Jacob Finci on November 5 to discuss the community's state of affairs. Finci noted that the Bosnian Jewish community, which currently numbers around 1000 members but faces a declining birth rate, is heavily focused on humanitarian and cultural activities. The community is primarily concerned about property restitution, particularly heirless property as well as property given to the State in exchange for exit visas in the late 1940s. Finci also spoke about his participation in the Inter-Religious Council, and commented on the influential but often problematic role that

religious leaders play in Bosnia. As illustrations, he cited the controversy over comments by the Bosniaks' religious leader, Reis Cerić, at a mosque in Detroit and the strained relationship between Cerić and the country's top Bosniak politicians, Sulejman Tihić and Haris Silajdžić. End Summary.

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY AT A GLANCE

¶2. (U) Ambassador met with Jewish Community leader Jacob Finci on November 5 to discuss the community's state of affairs in Bosnia. Finci said approximately 700, mostly aged members live in Sarajevo, and 300 hundred live in other parts of the country. He remarked matter-of-factly that over the past three years since he was elected as the community's leader, he had seen 40 deaths and just one newborn in Sarajevo. Finci then spoke at length about the community's humanitarian and cultural activities. These include overseeing a soup kitchen that provides 320-350 hot meals a day to people of all faiths; providing financial and other support to 400 elderly individuals (160 Holocaust survivors and 240 non-Jews) in Sarajevo and other large cities; teaching English classes; and administering a school for small business that provides up to 10,000 KM (7,401 USD) in seed money to students who complete the program.

¶3. (U) Finci declared that the country is free of anti-semitism, and identified property restitution as the community's top concern. Elaborating on these themes, he characterized rhetorical attacks on individual Jews, such as Foreign Minister Sven Alkalaj, as job performance-related criticism, not anti-semitic. The other ethnic groups are too

busy hating each other, and do not have time to hate the Jews, he surmised. He said the community would like to regain or receive compensation for property seized during the Nazi-supported Ustase regime, but the government maintains that all acts under the regime were declared null and void, and as a result, focuses its attention on claims from 1945 and beyond. For now, the community's efforts center on heirless property and forced &donations⁸) properties that were &donated⁸ to the state in exchange for exit visas for travel to Israel in 1948 and 1949. (Note: The Council of Ministers adopted a draft law on denationalization in September; it is now in Parliamentary procedure. End Note.)

¶14. (U) Finci noted that he is a founding member of the Inter-Religious Council, which is made up of Finci and three other religious leaders, Reis Cerić (Muslim), Cardinal Puljic (Catholic), and Vasilije Kacavenda (Orthodox). Established in 1997, the Council promotes inter-religious dialogue among the religious groups. The Council's chairman serves a year-long term that rotates among the four representatives, who focus exclusively on topics on which they can reach consensus. The Council has a radio show to discuss religious tolerance and other topics and produces a glossary of religious terminology for the public.

FINCI'S TAKE ON THE POLITICAL CRISIS

¶15. (C) Regarding the current political crisis, Finci lamented the absence of statesmen who would represent the interests of all Bosnians, unlike today's politicians who, he said, focus solely on advancing the interests of their own ethnic groups. Speaking philosophically, Finci noted the unclear role of religious leaders in a democratic state, the influential role that religious leaders play in Bosnia compared to other European countries, and the different messages religious leaders in Bosnia send to different

audiences. To illustrate his point, he referenced the recent scandal involving Reis Cerić's comments in a mosque in Detroit in which he reportedly described Bosnia as a homeland for Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims). He pointed out that the Reis probably did not expect that his comments would make their way back to Bosnia. Finci concluded that it is probably better that the Jewish community lacks a permanent rabbi since religious leaders tend to complicate matters.

¶16. (C) Finally, Finci shared his observations about infighting among Reis Cerić and the country's top Bosniak politicians -- SDA President Sulejman Tihic and SBiH President Haris Silajdzic. Without providing details, Finci divulged that, after splitting with Tihic, Cerić tried to develop a closer relationship with Silajdzic, but the two men had had a &small fight.⁸ Whatever the issue at stake, Silajdzic insisted that, as an elected official, he, and not Cerić, should speak for Bosniaks.

ENGLISH